



# SCOTTISH MINISTERS AS SEEN BY DR JOHNSON

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## I

IT must have been with a good deal of apprehension that Boswell looked forward to his first interview with the great man with whom he was to be afterwards so closely associated. Beyond a fervent admiration for Johnson as a man of letters, and a no less fervent desire to add him to his gallery of celebrities, there was nothing about this young man to mark him out for special notice. No doubt his “ lang pedigree ” might have counted for something if he had been born on the south side of the Border, for, as Mrs Thrale informs us, “ though a man of obscure birth himself, Johnson’s partiality for people of family was visible on every occasion ” : but it was common knowledge that Scotland and Scotsmen were his pet aversions. And when chance brought the two together in the parlour behind Tom Davies’ bookshop, Boswell learned that his doubts about his reception were not exaggerated. His rather feeble attempt to make a joke at his own expense—“ Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it ”—was met with the crushing rejoinder, “ That, Sir, I find, is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help.” “ This stroke stunned me a good deal ; and I felt myself not a little embarrassed, and apprehensive of what might come next.”

In course of time, however, such explosions, and there were many of them, ceased to stun him. He came to understand, he says in effect, that Johnson, in spite of his constant gibes and jokes about Scottish pride and poverty, had no real antipathy to North Britons. He disliked intensely those needy adventurers who found their way to London and who, too often, managed to attain to wealth or eminence far beyond their merits : but no man who was worthy of it was ever refused Johnson’s help or friendship merely because he was a Scot. If he seldom went to Dr Smollett’s, because of the “ swarm of Cawmells ” he generally found there, he counted Blair and Beattie and Lord Hailes among his friends. According to Boswell, Principal Robertson had put the whole matter in a nutshell when he wrote : “ Johnson sometimes cracks his jokes upon us, but he will find that we can distinguish between the stabs of malevolence

and the rebukes of the righteous, which are like excellent oil, and break not the head." But in spite of all attempts to tone down Johnson's scathing sarcasms and blistering remarks about our forefathers and their poverty-stricken country, Boswell never seems to have shaken off the uneasy feeling that his hero deliberately barbed his arrows and meant them to stick. The truth is, Boswell doth protest too much. Over and over again, when he puts on record some left-handed compliment to our unhappy country, he interrupts his narrative to assure his readers that Johnson's words must not be taken at their face value, that they are only his fun. His fidelity to truth, moreover, constrains him to admit that Johnson and the average Scotsman "greed best when they were separate"; that when the two foregathered, it was the more prudent course to keep Scotland out of the conversation; that when Johnson warmed to the subject, which he did on the slightest provocation, he was apt to become outrageous. Even Boswell himself dared not take the liberty of inviting Johnson to a dinner at which a Scotsman was to be present without warning him of the company he would meet.

Others again, not without opportunities of judging, charge Johnson with a prejudice against Scotland and Scotsmen as unreasonable as it was strong. Sir John Hawkins says he would be sorry if the Scots imagined Johnson's prejudices against "a brave, useful, and virtuous people," were common to their southern neighbours, while Mrs Thrale was shocked when she heard from his own lips how offensive he had been towards "a (Scots) writer of the first eminence in the world." Baretti puts it very strongly. "Johnson," he says, "was a true-born Englishman. He hated the Scotch, the French, the Dutch, the Hanoverians, and had the greatest contempt for all other nations; such were his early prejudices, which he never attempted to conquer." This from Baretti might be taken for so much mud-slinging—an art in which he was an adept—but after all Boswell says practically the same thing: "He was to some degree of excess a True-born Englishman: he permitted himself to look upon all nations but his own as barbarians."

In Scotland there were two opinions about Johnson and his prejudices. In their eagerness to welcome to the country the literary Goliath many leading Scotsmen were inclined to take his loudly expressed and generally hostile criticisms in a friendly spirit, or at least to ignore them; but there was at the same time a strong undercurrent of feeling against him. His notorious definition of oats had not been forgotten. Robert Fergusson spoke for more than himself when he protested against the lavish hospitality extended to "Samy" during his visit to St Andrews. Better men who have been the guests of that famous seat of learning have dined off haggis and sheep's-head, but nothing is too good for this great Pedagogue with his literarian lore.

For ne'er sic surly wight as he  
 Had met wi' sic respect frae me.  
 Mind ye what Sam, the lying loun !  
 Has in his Dictionar laid down ?  
 That Aits in England are a feast  
 To cow and horse and siccán beast,  
 While in Scots ground this growth was common  
 To gust the gab o' man and woman.

Nor were the memories he left behind him uniformly pleasant. Apart from the storm raised by the publication of his *Journey to the Western Isles*, which nine out of every ten Scotsmen took as a personal insult (though at this distance of time it is not easy to see where the insult lay), many people were, to put it mildly, not much impressed in favour of the great man. Mrs Boswell, who, for her husband's sake we may presume, was prepared to welcome him—did she not give up her own bedchamber to him and take a worse?—called him a bear: and Lord Auchinleck—but this was probably a preconceived opinion—described him as the worst-mannered dominie he ever met, and, regardless of his son's feelings, dubbed him a brute into the bargain. In this latter estimate of Johnson's character his Lordship is backed up by Mrs Sharpe of Hoddam, who wrote him down as “a great brute.” Captain Topham, himself an Englishman, who was resident in Edinburgh when the storm was at its height, saw nothing humorous in Johnson's inveterate habit of “taking off” Scotland and the Scots. “He was,” says Topham, “a man of surly and illiberal disposition,” who during his visit to Scotland “never said anything that did not convey some gross reflection” upon his hosts, “and whose whole design, when in the company of the ablest men in the country, who were certainly his superiors in point of abilities, was to shew them how contemptibly he thought of them.”

## II

Whether, with the great majority of his contemporaries, we should trace Johnson's anti-Scottish prejudice to downright ill-will and hatred, or whether, with Boswell, we should give him the benefit of what doubt there may be on the point, there can be no two opinions as to his attitude towards the Scottish Church. What he has to say about his faith and about his relations with those outside his own communion he says with sincerity and conviction. Though in ordinary conversation he would sometimes, from sheer love of an argument, defend the indefensible and make the worse appear the better cause, the verities of the faith were too awful and mysterious to be made the subjects of promiscuous discussion.

He was, however, always prepared to do battle for the Church of England and against "sectaries," by whatever name they might be called. Indeed Baretta declared that Johnson was about as tolerant of other forms of faith as a Spanish Inquisitor, which is perhaps putting it too strongly, for he had a soft side to the Roman Catholic Church, "the old religion," as he called it. He held that, while there was no definite warrant in Scripture for a belief in transubstantiation or in Purgatory, and while prayers for the dead and the invocation of the saints were nowhere directly enjoined, such doctrines were not anti-Scriptural. But his toleration did not extend to Presbyterianism. To him a non-Episcopal Church was inconceivable: it was an abuse of words to speak of an institution which had no bishops, no apostolical ordination, as a Church.

It is not too much to say that Johnson would far sooner have seen Scotland Roman Catholic than Presbyterian. The Scottish Reformation, in his eyes, was more than a blunder: it was a crime. The work of Knox and of his fellow-ruffians began and ended in destruction and desecration. Every ruined chapel and deserted shrine he visited even in the Outer Hebrides, in islands the Reformers never heard of, was a further evidence of Knox's reforming zeal. The dilapidated state of Elgin Cathedral raised his indignation to white heat, for he was informed that the lead had been stripped off the roof and moulded into bullets for the Scottish army. Destruction and neglect were bad enough, but this was sacrilege. But, as he confesses, such acts were not peculiar to Scotsmen. "Let us not, however," he says in a paragraph which he afterwards suppressed, "make too much haste to despise our neighbours. There is now a body of men, not less decent or virtuous than the Scottish Council, longing to melt the lead of an English cathedral. What they shall melt, it is just that they should swallow." The point of this paragraph is that it was the roof of Lichfield Cathedral that was threatened.

The Scots, then, had lost almost everything and gained nothing by their so-called Reformation. With the chapels and cathedrals had gone practically all that in Johnson's opinion was essential to a Church. There was, it is true, little difference between the Thirty-nine Articles and the Confession of Faith, so far as doctrine was concerned; but doctrine was not everything. There was no Prayer Book, and therefore no public worship in the proper sense of the term: nothing but assemblies to which people went to hear a man pray. So Johnson vowed that he would not countenance such assemblies, and he kept his word. On August 15, the first Sunday he spent in Scotland, he was piloted by Boswell to the English chapel, where Mr Carre preached a good sermon to which Johnson gave scant attention. A week later he was one of a numerous and splendid congregation in the English chapel at Aberdeen. The next Sunday he attended the English chapel at Inverness, where the congrega-

tion was neither numerous nor splendid. But for the next ten Sundays he never darkened a church door. When he was a guest at Cawdor Manse, he graciously condescended to join in family worship, much to Boswell's delight and surprise, and to listen to an extempore prayer, which he acknowledged was a good one, though it could have been improved by the addition of the Lord's Prayer. But he never repeated the experiment. At Dunvegan, on September 19, he sat in his own room reading *The Decay of Christian Piety* and the edifying sermons of Tristram Shandy during a service in the dining-room below: and he refused, when at Auchinleck, to go with the Boswells to the Parish Kirk.

It might, perhaps, be urged in defence of Johnson that this was no one's business but his own. If he felt that he could not join reverently in Presbyterian worship, he was justified in refusing to take part in it. To men of broader sympathies such conduct may well seem intolerant and narrow: but conviction is conviction, and ought to be respected. Johnson is not the only man whose principles—or prejudices—have stood in the way of his attendance at other Churches than his own. Scotsmen have been known to absent themselves from English parish churches because they did not approve of vestments and altars, of read prayers and responses; and few of their fellow-countrymen have thought the worse of them. But the two cases are not parallel. The Scottish tourist does not expect the English clergy to ask him to dinner, or to put him up overnight, or to take him round the country and point out to him its antiquities. But Johnson expected all this as a matter of course. The Scottish ministers were to give him the best they had to give, and he was to give nothing in return. Yet surely he might have made some slight concession to Scottish feeling. He might, as Sir John Hawkins says, have left his prejudices behind him, and might, as a testimony of respect for their ministers, have been present occasionally at divine service in their churches. Even Boswell admits that his hero carried his prejudices to the verge of bigotry, though of course he does not put it exactly in that way. "My father and I," he says, "went to public worship in our parish church, in which I regretted that Dr Johnson would not join us. . . . My friend would certainly have shewn more liberality had he attended" (Nov. 7, 1773). It is significant that Boswell's regret for his fellow-traveller's lack of liberality only began to show itself at Auchinleck. One suspects that Lord Auchinleck had drawn his son's attention to it and had exercised his powers of sarcasm on this ill-mannered dominie, who had no scruple about accepting your hospitality, but who was too good to go to church with you. Johnson was not content simply to stay away from public worship while in Scotland: he could not resist the temptation, which came to him pretty

frequently, of expressing his opinion of Presbyterianism to his Scottish friends and admirers. "Come, let us see what was once a church," he said to Principal Robertson as they entered St Giles' on a week-day—which does not sound very witty, and which was certainly in bad taste. When again the Principal asked him why he should be so reluctant to attend a parish church in Scotland, while Scotsmen showed no such reluctance in regard to English parish churches, Johnson's answer was that the King of Siam might send ambassadors to Louis XIV, but the French monarch did not return the compliment. So proud indeed was the sage of this sally that he saved it up and repeated it to Mrs Thrale, who was shocked to think how greatly disgusted the Principal must have been.

### III

On other occasions and in other company Johnson spoke his mind freely about the low state of learning in the Scottish Universities and the consequent ignorance of their *alumni*. George Buchanan was the only great scholar that Scotland had to her credit, and now that the country had sunk into Presbyterianism, her Universities turned out nothing but half-educated boys. Granting that learning was more diffused in Scotland than in England, the best that could be said about it was that it was like bread in a besieged city, of which every one got a mouthful but no one a full meal. Once at supper at Dunvegan, when Macqueen, the parish minister, was present—a man, by the way, whom Johnson admitted had his own share of learning—the conversation turned on the assiduity of the Scottish ministers in visiting and catechising their flocks. Boswell, greatly daring, ventured to remark that in this they much excelled the English clergy, but Johnson would have none of it. "He grew warm and broke forth: 'I do not believe your people are better instructed. If they are, it is the blind leading the blind; for your clergy are not instructed themselves.'" It is, however, only fair to say that he toned down this sweeping assertion by hastening to add: "When I talk of the ignorance of your clergy, I talk of them as a body; I do not mean that there are not individuals who are learned."

This incident does more than illustrate Johnson's anti-Presbyterian prejudices; it throws a strong light upon his Episcopalian sympathies. He looked on the clergy of his own Church with an almost superstitious reverence, and spoke of them habitually as a class of men who for piety and learning had no equals anywhere, least of all in Scotland. This curious obsession of his can be explained only in one of two ways: either he did not know, or he chose not to acknowledge, the true state of affairs. And with all charity to Johnson it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that

he deliberately refused to see the spots upon the sun. His own uncle, the Reverend, and disreputable, Cornelius Ford, who, says Mrs Thrale, "chose to be eminent only for vice," was as fine a specimen of a clerical black sheep as one could desire to see. It was, moreover, freely admitted and regretted that many of the clergy were neither pious nor learned: that there were dignitaries—not to mention those of lower orders of the clergy—whose duties sat very lightly on their shoulders. Thomas Pennant, the well-known traveller, has a good word to say in favour of the Scottish ministers, very few of whom, unlike too many of their brethren south of the Tweed, "sink their characters by midnight brawls, by mixing with the gaming world either in cards, cocking, or horse-racing." Dr Carlyle of Inveresk expresses an opinion equally unfavourable. During a holiday spent at Buxton in 1763 he met many clergymen of the "lower order," as he calls them, and the more he saw of them the less he liked them. "They are divided into bucks and prigs," he says; "the first inconceivably ignorant, and sometimes indecent in their morals"; the second "but half-learned, narrow-minded and overbearing." It may be objected that Carlyle was a Scotsman, and as such unreliable: but he was no puritan. At a time when the theatre was anathema in Edinburgh he was libelled by his presbytery "in that he did keep company and familiarly converse with West Digges, also with Sarah Ward, persons of bad fame," that is, he attended the rehearsals of Home's once famous tragedy, *Douglas*; he boasted in his *Autobiography* that he was the first minister in Scotland who played cards in his manse without first locking the doors and seeing to it that the children and servants were in bed; he was fond of dancing; and, in short, he was more a man of the world than a minister. There is therefore very little prejudice in his verdict: indeed we may take it that the clergy must have gone pretty far over the score before they incurred his censure. But in Johnson's presence there must be no hint of any such defections. When "Scottish ministers *versus* English clergy" was the subject of debate, Johnson claimed for himself the right of absolutely free speech; but he would not permit the use of a *tu quoque* argument. One wonders how such discussions arose and who was the aggressor. On this point Boswell is ominously silent. He tells us, for instance, that there was very nearly an explosion at Cawdor Manse when Mr M'Aulay talked slightly of the lower English clergy. "This is a day of novelties," growled Johnson; "I have seen old trees in Scotland, and I have heard the English clergy treated with disrespect." But Boswell does not tell us how the dispute began.

In a description of a similar scene, however, Boswell seems to let the cat out of the bag. On November 5 the travellers, now taking their ease at the stately modern mansion of Auchinleck, accepted an invitation to

dine with the Rev. John Dun, the minister of the parish, with whom Johnson could associate round a dinner-table, though he would not go to hear him preach. There is every reason to believe that Dun meant to be friendly. He was a simple, kindly man, with no very strong aversion except perhaps against a certain deistical and profane poet—Robert Burns by name—who had the *Holy Fair* and the *Address to the Deil* to his discredit. That, however, by the way, for it belongs to Dun's later history. As we learn from some notes appended to his *Sermons*, published in 1790, he was proud of Lord Auchinleck's patronage, and was not likely therefore to insult any of his Lordship's guests. Yet somehow he contrived to do so. He dared to speak in Johnson's presence of fat bishops and drowsy deans, and was immediately “downed” by the rejoinder: “Sir, you know no more of our Church than a Hottentot.” As Boswell tells the story, it looks as if Dun had loosed this thunderbolt upon himself, as if he had been playing with gunpowder, with the natural consequence that he had got his fingers burned. But by way of introduction to the story Boswell makes the damaging admission that Johnson occasionally attacked Presbyterian ministers, which seems to be much the same as saying that on this occasion it was Johnson who roused Dun, and not Dun who roused Johnson. The lesson taught this simple-minded minister was not, as Boswell would make it appear, that it was wise to let sleeping dogs lie, but rather that in a wordy warfare with Johnson there was to be no shooting back.

## IV

The question whether Johnson's prejudice against Scotland and the Scots was changed or modified by his three months' sojourn in the country admits of both a negative and an affirmative answer. In some respects, it must be admitted, he saw no reason to change his preconceived opinions. Our Universities, for example, did not improve in his eyes on a closer acquaintance. He found little to say in praise of their buildings and equipment, except that Edinburgh had a good library and that there was a fine hall in Marischal College, Aberdeen. When Principal Murison pointed out the beauties of their library-hall and asked triumphantly whether anything so fine was to be seen in England, Johnson seems to have made no reply; but doubtless he had the Principal's remarks in his mind when he wrote to Mrs Thrale: “They showed us their Colleges, in one of which there is a library that for luminousness and elegance may vie at least”—not with Oxford or Cambridge, but with Mr Thrale's private library at Streatham! As for Glasgow, all he has to say is that the College has not benefited by the prosperity of the city. But perhaps

Johnson might have said harder things without overstepping the truth, for the Universities in the seventeenth century were little short of a national disgrace. He retained, moreover, his very poor opinion of the state of learning in Scotland. Boys came up to the Universities with so little fundamental knowledge that the structure could not be lofty. As a result, they obtained at most a "smattering of learning, something that was neither knowledge nor ignorance, but half-way between the two." A further objection was that the doctorate could be obtained too easily: "whoever is a Master of Arts," he says, "may, if he pleases, immediately become a Doctor." Perhaps he might have had a higher opinion of a Scottish doctorate if any of our Universities had offered him an LL.D. Why he missed this honour it is impossible to say, for he had powerful friends in the professors of all the four of them: and it is singular that Boswell does not mention the omission. But the fact remains that the most famous literary man of his day never received the offer of a Scottish academical distinction. In any case Johnson's statement that the doctorate could be had for the asking is not accurate. In no University could the Master of Arts become immediately a Doctor: and in Glasgow at least the degrees of D.D. and LL.D were very rarely conferred. To be quite honest, however, it must be added—to put it in the form of an Irish bull—that when they were given, they were generally sold.

This, it must be remembered, represents Johnson's final judgment upon Scottish education, and is duly chronicled in his *Journey to the Western Isles*; yet there are signs in the same book that learning was more widely diffused than such comments seem to imply. The truth is that Johnson was intellectually too honest to depreciate scholarship or literary merit, no matter where he found it. In the world of letters the distinction between Englishman and Scotsman, between Episcopalian and Presbyterian, did not exist. If a Scottish minister had anything to say, and said it well, Johnson's antipathy might express itself in a wish that the dog had not been a Presbyterian, but it went no further. There was a very general impression in his day that his bitter hostility to James M'Pherson, "the Scottish Homer," as some of his infatuated countrymen grandiloquently called him, was nothing but an outbreak of English spleen. But in common fairness Johnson must be acquitted of that charge. He threw discredit on the authenticity of *Ossian* because he believed he was a myth. If M'Pherson's English poem was a translation of an ancient Highland epic, where, Johnson asked reasonably enough, were the original manuscripts? And when, in spite of repeated promises, M'Pherson failed to produce any tangible evidence that such manuscripts existed, Johnson, with his usual plainness of speech, denounced him as a liar and a fraud. He was right, moreover, in his opinion that *Ossian* was no great poem and that comparisons between M'Pherson and Homer

or Virgil were sheer absurdities, though his sneer that many men, many women, and many children might have written a poem quite as good may not be without some trace of personal animus. Take, as another instance, Dr Robertson and his *History of Scotland*. In opposition to the opinion of the critics and of the reading public Johnson could not be brought to admit that Robertson's book had any particular merit. For these strictures Boswell, who was greatly perplexed about them, felt it necessary to offer some apology. Perhaps, he says, they are only so many jokes at the expense of Scotsmen ; or it may be that Johnson ran down Robertson for no other reason than that Boswell had presumed to defend him ; for the greatest of the critics could not possibly be blind to the merits of one of the best histories ever written. But the truth is that Johnson was most reluctant to discuss Robertson as an author. If he could not join in the universal chorus of praise, he preferred to hold his tongue. "I love Roberston," he had said, "but I will not talk of his books." He did talk of them, however, on one occasion when he was hitting out promiscuously against the Scottish historians—hitting all the harder, perhaps, because Boswell did his best to defend them. Poor Boswell learned to his amazement that what he took for history was nothing but imagination and romance ; that there was nothing to admire in Robertson's style, which was only so much verbiage ; that the best thing this belauded historian could do was to go over his book and carefully strike out the purple patches. No doubt Johnson was very angry at the time, but many a true word is spoken in anger as well as in jest. In spite of his passion Johnson speaks here as literary critic, not as a narrow-minded Englishman who could see no good in anything that was not English.

If we would see how small a part was played by prejudice in Johnson's literary judgments, we have but to recall his enthusiasm for, and his delight in, Blair's *Sermons*. It is very questionable whether this popular preacher would ever have been known beyond his native country but for Johnson's kindly help. Strahan the bookseller could see no money in the literary wares that Blair had to offer, and would have turned down the famous *Sermons* if the happy thought had not occurred to him to submit a sample to Johnson before finally refusing them. "I have read the first sermon," was the great critic's answer ; "to say it is good is too little." What did it matter that the author was a Scot and a Presbyterian ? Here was a man who had something to say, and who knew how to say it. At the same time he recognised that Blair had his limitations ; that, though he had a message for his own age, his fame was not likely to survive himself, a verdict which time has proved to be correct. During his stay in Scotland Johnson invariably showed the same liberal spirit. He cherished a lasting respect for Mr Donald M'Queen, minister

of a Skye parish, whom he found well read in modern literature and who somehow, out of a microscopic salary, had managed to get together a surprising number of books. A pleasant surprise awaited Johnson in the manse of Sleat, where he was the guest for a night of the Rev. Martin M'Pherson. Here again were books in abundance, a whole pressful in his bedroom, Greek, Latin, French, and English, which had belonged to his host's father, Dr John. But what pleased Johnson most of all was a paraphrase of the Song of Moses done into Latin by Dr M'Pherson, which turned up in an old number of the *Scots Magazine*. "It does him honour," cried Johnson enthusiastically, "he has a great deal of Latin, and good Latin." Though Johnson does not say so, it did honour not only to M'Pherson but to Aberdeen University, for it was there that the foundations of M'Pherson's scholarship had been laid.

This was high praise indeed from one who was almost as familiar with Latin as with English, and who had perhaps more Latin, and good Latin, at his finger-ends than any man in the kingdom. Nor did M'Queen and M'Pherson stand alone. Johnson saw so many books in out-of-the-way manses, and so many ministers who knew the inside of them, that he summed up his final impressions in the following words: "They [the people] have no reason to complain of insufficient pastors, for I saw none in the islands whom I had reason to think either deficient in learning or irregular in life, but found several with whom I could not converse without wishing, as my respect increased, that they had not been Presbyterians." And he adds a little further on: "The ministers in the islands had attained to such knowledge as may justly be admired in men who have no motive to study but generous curiosity, or what is still better, desire of usefulness; with such politeness as so narrow a circle of converse could not have supplied but to minds naturally disposed to elegance."

Words like these are not only a tribute to the character and learning of the Scottish ministers: they are a tribute no less striking to the writer's sterling honesty. Johnson came to Scotland with very definite opinions—and as unflattering as they were definite—as to the Presbyterian Church and its ministers, and it can only have been with a struggle that he brought himself to acknowledge that things were by no means so bad as he had expected—one feels tempted to say, as he had hoped. That his prejudices took an unconscionable time in dying may be seen from the incident already mentioned, when Johnson, driven into a corner and forced to admit that the ministers were assiduous in their efforts to instruct their people, brought the discussion to an end by declaring that their teaching did not count for much: it was the blind leading the blind. But the point is that his prejudice did die, and that he frankly acknowledged it.

## V

A further question remains, and it is worth asking. Did the ministers join in the hymn of hate with which Johnson's *Journey to the Western Isles* was received in Scotland? Now, it is true that one of the bitterest and most scurrilous attacks upon the book was the work of Donald Macnicol, minister of Lismore, who, not content with accusing Johnson of deliberate perversion of facts, goes out of his way to make mean insinuations against his ancestry and moral character; but it would be hard to think of any Scotsman, lay or clerical, who knew him with anything approaching intimacy, who did not speak of him with admiration and respect. Not that they placed his account of his travels above criticism, or were prepared to endorse his every statement. Dr Beattie, for instance, complained that Johnson was not always accurate; that he had formed his opinions of the country and the people from insufficient data; that the book contained "some asperities that seem to be the result of national prejudice." But though he could not defend everything in the book, he found it entertaining on the whole, and worthy of its author, whom, Beattie is careful to add, he continues to admire for his genius and esteem for his virtues.

And this suggests another question. How shall we account for such expressions of esteem and admiration? How did Johnson manage to win and to retain the esteem of his Scottish friends? The great literary lion makes a pilgrimage to Scotland, and everywhere he goes professors, ministers, learned men of all kinds tumble over each other in their desire to do him honour. Yet, on the face of it, the great man does little to draw forth their good opinion: sometimes, indeed, it looks as if he did his best to forfeit it. He tells them that their country is a wilderness, that their towns are mean and dirty, that any advance towards civilization of which they could boast began with the union of the two kingdoms. He cracks his jokes about their lack of money and of education. When the talk turns, as it was bound at times to do, on religion, he tells them that their great Reformer was a ruffian, who ought to have been buried in the highway, that their churches are no churches, that their ministers are too ignorant to enlighten their flocks. It is true that many of his comments on Scotland and the Scots were made in private conversations with Boswell and, but for his mania for putting on record every word that fell from Johnson's lips, would never have become public property. But when the fit was on him, Johnson spared no one. In short he put a strain upon his friendship with Scottish people that might well have ended in a break. Yet his friends on this side of the Border never wavered in their admiration and their regard for him.

Was this snobbery on their part, snobbery naked and unashamed?

I have sometimes heard it so described. Many Scotsmen were so eager to be able to say that they had shaken hands with the great man that they were ready, like dogs, to lick the hand that thrashed them. Theirs was the spirit of the man who preferred to be kicked by Royalty to being left unnoticed. Where was their patriotism, their Scottish pride? That Scotsmen of that day were entirely free from snobbery no one who has read the familiar letters of the eighteenth century will deny. It is indeed no libel on our ancestors to say that there was more fawning on the great then than now; few altogether escaped the taint, certainly not Johnson himself. But I cannot think that this explanation is satisfactory. It seems to me that there must have been some attractive quality of head and heart which drew men and women irresistibly to him. What with his ungainly figure, his scorched wig, his hands and linen much in need of a wash, he was no mantelpiece ornament; and yet what London lady was not proud to see him in her drawing-room? It is true that Mrs Boswell never quite got over the grease-spots he left upon her carpets when he turned the candles upside down to make them burn more clearly; but Mrs Thrale, who knew him better, endured his untidy habits and person for twenty years. His table manners were so bad that even the unmannerly Scots commented unfavourably upon them; yet he could "dine abroad" as often as he cared. It was much the same with his friends. Intolerant of opposition, incapable of enjoying or appreciating a joke against himself, and prone to see a slight where none was meant, he, perhaps more than any man, often brought his friendships into peril by the roughness of his tongue. Yet he seldom or never permanently estranged those who knew him best. Boswell was not the only man Johnson tossed and hurt who found his way back to be tossed and hurt again. And it is no small tribute to his magnetic power that so many Scottish people, whose goodwill he did so little to keep and so much to destroy, should have counted him among their friends.